

Something New by dragonwings948

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Summary:

After closing the gate, Eleven finally gets to experience an almost normal life with her friends and discover new things she's never encountered before.

1. Coming Home

Author's Note:

I'm so obsessed with Stranger Things that it's probably not healthy. Oh well. Anyway, I'm really attached to Eleven and I love her to pieces. All I want is for her to be happy with her friends. Especially Mike.

Each chapter is going to detail a different "new thing" that El encounters. The first chapter takes place during the end of episode 8/beginning of 9, but the rest will be post-season. Enjoy! :)

The smell of danger was an all too familiar sensation.

Eleven paused on the perimeter of the Byers' property, the last place she had seen Mike when she had searched for him after getting off the bus. She wanted nothing more than to run straight into the house and see him, but she knew something was wrong. It was too quiet. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end and a dark feeling of dread gripped her heart and tied her stomach in knots.

Something indistinguishable moved in the darkness, like the night itself was playing tricks. A shout came from the Byers' house, and though Eleven was too far away to hear the words, she knew Hopper's voice all too well. The feelings that suddenly rushed through her disturbed her concentration. She forgot all about the danger and realised that she was about to come face to face with the people she missed the most.

She was coming home.

The flood of emotions that followed the thought was new to her. It was longing and love all jumbled up with apprehension and doubting, coupled with the rational part of her mind trying to remind her that she was in danger, that her *friends* were in danger.

Eleven finally pinpointed one of the shadowy creatures as it

sat poised to spring at the front door of the house. She knew what it was immediately: a demogorgon, just like the one she had defeated, only smaller.

Without another moment's hesitation she concentrated, mustering up a huge amount of force from inside of her, and made the creature hover a few feet above the ground. It shrieked with surprise, but the cry was cut short as Eleven threw it against the nearest tree. Another demogorgon spun around and echoed the dead creature's call, summoning three more of its kind to converge in front of Eleven. In a matter of seconds she snapped their necks with an inclination of her head. The remaining demogorgon leaped at her, but she forced it back and hurled it straight through a window.

The world was still for a moment. Eleven waited. She felt wetness oozing down through her nose, but it was such a common occurrence that she barely even gave it a thought anymore.

A loud shuffling of feet sounded from inside the house and Eleven watched several people gather around where the dead demogorgon must have fallen after smashing through the window. Hopper appeared in the opening, and then Mike's mop of dark hair.

With nothing in her way now, Eleven still paused. She had broken all of Hopper's rules. She hadn't answered Mike after his days and days of trying so hard to reach her. She looked so different than when she had last seen any of them.

Could she really be accepted again?

Eleven inhaled a steadying breath and took a step forward. No matter what the answer to that question was, her friends needed her.

She walked up to the door and easily undid the locks inside. She used just a gentle nudge with her mind to open the door, making it swing out slowly. A sea of faces waited inside, expressions all morphing into awed shock as every eye trained on her.

But one face stood out among the rest. Mike stepped in front of the others, his eyes wide and disbelieving and his mouth slightly

hanging open.

Eleven felt a smile twitch at her lips. Yes. *This* was home.

Mike smiled back at her, tears filling his eyes. “Eleven?”

“Mike,” she breathed as she stepped into his arms.

She decided then that “coming home” was one of the best feelings she had ever felt.

2. Jealous

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, the response to this fic has been incredible! Thank you all so much!!! :) This chapter was more difficult to write, but I hope you enjoy it all the same!

I probably won't update next week because of Thanksgiving, but after the 28th my senior recital will be over so I'll have way more free time. Might even update more often than once a week; we'll see!

Eleven stared at the TV but saw nothing of the drama that was playing out on the screen. As she sat wrapped in a bulky jacket a couple sizes too big, leaning her head against Hopper's arm, the TV's noise a gentle buzz in the background, it was all too easy to let her mind drift away to other things. And, as usual, "other things" began with Mike.

She hadn't seen him in five days, however much they both hated it. Mrs. Wheeler didn't like the idea of them seeing each other at all, but she was adamant about Mike not going all the way out to the cabin on weekdays.

"I'll see you next Saturday, okay?" he had said last week, trying to smile despite the words he was uttering.

"Not before?" she had asked, knowing the answer. After being separated from him and the rest of the boys for so long, it was difficult to accept that she still couldn't see them even now that the bad men were gone and the monsters were defeated.

Mike had frowned. *"No."*

"It's not fair," she had replied softly, using a phrase she had learned from him.

"I know," Mike had agreed. *"It sucks. But in a year this will all*

be over, and you can go to school with us and come to my house any time you want."

Eleven had sighed, knowing full well that he wasn't certain about any of those things. *"More waiting."*

Mike's eyes had reflected what she felt: the helplessness of it all. After everything they had been through they were still only kids, forced to listen to and obey the adults who said they knew best. And while Eleven knew that Hopper was a good man, she couldn't help but question his order for her to lie low for a year until everything, as he put it, "died down." Despite the home he had made for her, she still felt trapped.

"I'll miss you," Mike had said in that slightly embarrassed and unsure way of his, where he stuttered a little but still held her gaze.

Eleven had smiled and reached for his hand. *"I'll miss you too."* Then they had hugged for just a moment, knowing that Hopper was watching them from the cabin's window.

Eleven sighed as she thought of it. She would see Mike tomorrow. *Tomorrow.*

A series of knocks on the front door startled Eleven from her thoughts. She sat up and looked at Hopper as he jumped to his feet, his eyes flicking towards the table where he had set down his gun. After a moment his expression slackened and he sighed. "I forgot," he muttered.

"Forgot what?" Eleven asked. Hopper walked to the front door and Eleven followed, asking another question since he hadn't answered her first one yet. "Who is it?"

But instead of giving a response, Hopper opened the door to reveal Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers standing on the small front porch. Jonathan held a bulging trash bag over his shoulder and raised his free hand in greeting. "Hey," he said, mostly addressing Hopper, though he met Eleven's eyes for a brief moment.

"Thanks for coming out here," Hopper said, stepping to the

side to allow them in and then shutting the door behind them. Eleven followed his lead and got out of their way, wondering what Nancy and Jonathan were doing here and why Hopper was thanking them for it. She got a better look at the bag Jonathan carried as he walked in and could tell that it wasn't full of trash.

"What's in there?" she asked, her curiosity getting the best of her.

Jonathan smiled, but Hopper answered before he could. "It's Christmas come early for you, kid," he said, smiling down at her.

Nancy finally spoke up. "I went through my old clothes and found some that might fit you."

Eleven's interest heightened. "To borrow?" she asked. It was a word Hopper had taught her, meaning that you kept something for a short amount of time and then gave it back. Like the clothes Mike had given her when he had first found her and brought her home.

"No," Nancy said with a shake of her head and a hesitant smile. "For you to keep."

"I thought you might need some new clothes," Hopper explained. "Nancy offered to give you some of hers."

Eleven caught his cue. Recently they had been working on something called "manners;" essentially, it meant being nice to people, especially people you didn't know well.

"Thank you," Eleven said sincerely, looking up at Nancy. Acquiring things of her own was a feeling she had come to love, and she was excited at the prospect of being able to call a whole new set of clothes hers.

"Do you want to look through them?" Nancy asked, glancing up at Hopper for approval.

"You girls go ahead," Hopper said. "Jonathan and I need to talk anyway."

Nancy frowned and quirked an eyebrow at Jonathan, her

expression conveying an unspoken question.

“He’s not in trouble,” Hopper assured. “I, uh...need his help with something.”

Jonathan shrugged and handed the bag of clothes over to Nancy. Eleven looked up at Hopper, wondering why he was being secretive.

“Don’t worry, kid.” Somehow seeming to sense her distress, Hopper ruffled her hair. “Take Nancy to your room and look through those clothes. I bet you’re gonna find some stuff you like.” He put energy into his last sentence, trying to divert her attention.

It didn’t work. Not on her.

“Friends don’t lie,” she reminded him.

“I know.” He nodded gravely. “Trust me on this one, okay?”

She gazed into his eyes and then nodded slowly. “Okay.”

He smiled at her and, though she still had her doubts, Eleven turned to lead the way to her room. Once her and Nancy were both inside she used a small amount of force from her mind to tug the door closed. Like a reflex she raised her arm to wipe her nose on her sleeve, but she thought twice as she remembered Hopper’s recent lecture about using something disposable instead; anything he didn’t have to wash.

Eleven looked over at the box of tissues Hopper had placed in her room for that very purpose and grabbed one, wiping it quickly over her nose and then crumpling it in her fist. She didn’t bother to glance at the stain of red she knew would be there.

“This is...nice,” Nancy commented as she took a seat on the edge of the bed, her eyes wandering around the room.

Eleven shrugged as she stuffed the tissue in her pocket. It was small, her mattress was hard, and now that it was winter it got really cold most days, but in a way, she still loved it. Despite being under house arrest, she had found herself missing it when she had gone

away in search of her sister.

“It’s home,” she said simply as she sat next to Nancy.

Nancy met her eyes and smiled before reaching down to open up the garbage bag and pull out a flannel shirt coloured with dark blues and yellows. Eleven reached out to take it and Nancy spoke as her fingers brushed the fabric.

“Mike gave this to me from Max,” Nancy explained. “She wanted you to have it.”

Eleven drew her hand away like she had been burned and glared at the shirt like it was Max herself.

A smirk twitched at Nancy’s lips. “Mike told me you’d react like that.”

Eleven didn’t respond. She didn’t want anything that had come from that...that *mouth-breather*.

“Are you jealous?”

Eleven frowned at Nancy. The word was familiar, probably something she had heard on TV, but she had no idea what it meant. “What does ‘jealous’ mean?”

Nancy breathed a light chuckle and looked up at the ceiling, pursing her lips as she thought. “It’s um...” Her eyebrows furrowed together as she concentrated, and Eleven couldn’t help but notice that her thinking face was very similar to Mike’s. “It’s sort of like when you don’t like someone because...they take something that’s yours and you want it back.”

Eleven thought of Mike grabbing Max’s hand that day she had gone to the school. Her eyes had stung with tears of betrayal. Never before had she seen Mike hold anyone’s hand but her own.

Nancy pulled Eleven from her thoughts. “Hey, you were the first girl the boys hung out with. It can’t be easy seeing Max there like she took your place.”

As Nancy uttered the words, Eleven knew that it was exactly how she felt. She sighed, looking down at the flannel shirt Nancy still held in her hand. "I am jealous," she admitted.

Nancy crossed one arm over her chest and was silent for a moment. "Well...I don't really know Max, but I don't think she's trying to replace you. And I *know* the boys aren't," she added. "They never shut up about you."

Eleven smiled at that. She remembered Dustin and Lucas telling her that they had talked about her every day when she had been gone.

Nancy held the flannel out to Eleven and looked at her with a solemn stare. "I know it's not easy to try to be friends with someone you don't like, but I think you should at least give Max a chance."

Eleven glanced at the shirt again and finally took it from Nancy. The material was warm and soft in her hands. She put it on over her own shirt and had to admit to herself that it fit better than most of the clothes she had now, and the thick material warded off the winter chill.

"Cozy," she decided was the right word.

Nancy smiled at her. "Like it?"

"Yes." Eleven crossed her arms over her chest and considered for a moment. "I'll give her one chance," she decided.

Nancy nodded approvingly, her smile widening to show her teeth. After a moment the corners of her lips turned down into a thoughtful frown and she folded her hands in her lap. "Hey," she began slowly, "what you did, closing the gate, was really brave, and I never got to thank you for it." She hesitated, twisting her hands together. "If you ever need anything or you want to talk...ask me about anything..."

"Like a sister?" Eleven had never quite forgotten Mike's hopes of her living in his basement and being part of his family, including Nancy becoming her sister. Though she doubted that dream would

ever come true now, Eleven found herself still wanting someone like a sister; someone like Nancy.

Nancy's eyes widened at the question but her expression grew softer. "Yeah," she agreed, "I can be like your sister."

A good warmth spread through Eleven's chest and she smiled. Nancy offered a small smile in return before reaching down to grab another item of clothing from the bag.

Eleven shrugged off her new flannel shirt and thought back again to when she had seen Max and Mike in the gym. She remembered the uneasy curling of her stomach, the white-hot anger that had flared through her as she had seen Mike smile at Max.

Jealous, Eleven thought, committing the word to memory.

Notes for the Chapter:

Duffer Brothers, please give me some Nancy and Eleven interaction in the show...

Next chapter: Eleven tries to figure out how to give Max a chance.

P.S. Yes, you will eventually find out what Hopper is being so sneaky about. ;)

3. Competition and Camaraderie

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey everyone! Thank you so much for being patient with me, I got this chapter out as fast as I could but it took me way longer than I anticipated and I've been really busy the past couple of weeks!

This chapter evolved into something I never expected and ended up being way more complex than I planned. I had a lot of things I wanted Eleven to think about, and a lot of stuff was physically happening in the story as well. Hope you enjoy! Thank you all for being so awesome! ^-^

P.S. Fun fact, the word "snowball" is in this fic 24 times.

P.P.S. Please ignore the random extra space in the middle of the fic, it's a formatting issue that the site won't let me fix. -_-

“Be back here by four o’ clock sharp, okay?” Hopper crossed his arms over his chest and trained his gaze on Mike first, then Eleven as he added, “That’s four-zero-zero.”

Eleven nodded. “Four o’ clock,” she repeated.

“We’ll make sure she’s back,” Mike said in a rush, a smile breaking through his composure despite the air of solemnity. The words were barely out of his mouth before he turned towards the front porch steps.

Hopper grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back before he could even take a step. “Whoa, kid.” His stern gaze choked all excitement out of Eleven as he glanced between her and Mike. “You listen to me, both of you. If anyone sees you,” he said, looking at Eleven, “if anything happens...” His gaze swept over to Mike. “... we’re done with this until next year. *Do you understand?*” He

articulated each word clearly, eyes darting from Eleven to Mike and back again.

Mike nodded, no trace of a smile visible on his features anymore. "Yes, sir. We'll be really careful."

Hopper turned to Eleven and raised his eyebrows. "Understand?"

"Yes," Eleven said with a nod. "Four o' clock, don't be seen."

"That's right, kid." He sighed, the tension in his jaw relaxing, and looked her over. "Are you warm enough?"

Eleven looked down at her boots, jeans, padded jacket, and gloves, almost all donated by Nancy the night before. Though the world was coated in a thick cover of white snow, she hadn't even noticed the cold.

"Cozy," she said, smiling as she used one of her favourite words.

Hopper's lips stretched into a small smile and he reached over to ruffle her hair. "Have fun."

And with that, Mike's energy returned and he dashed down the porch steps to where Lucas, Max, Dustin, and Will were waiting beyond the cabin's perimeter, outlined by tripwires. Eleven followed suit just behind, unable to keep from smiling as she approached the rest of her friends.

"He said yes?" Lucas asked in disbelief.

"We have to be back by four o' clock," Mike told them as he carefully stepped over the tripwire.

"That's plenty of time," Dustin said. "Come on!"

Eleven set one foot on the other side of the tripwire and looked back at the porch where Hopper stood watching. She waved at him and he waved back, his expression indiscernible from this distance.

Eleven turned back to her friends and set both feet outside the cabin's limits. She felt her lips stretch into an even wider smile as she looked at Mike.

Freedom.

So far, "hanging out" had been lying in bed as she recovered from closing the gate, listening to the boys tell stories about what had happened with Will, the demodogs, and the Mind Flayer before she had gotten involved. Once she had regained her strength, the boys had brought over board games and Dungeons and Dragons and had taught her how to play. A few weeks ago they had started bringing Max along too, and Eleven had just ignored her entirely.

"*Can you please just try?*" Lucas had muttered to Eleven as they had been leaving the cabin a couple weeks ago.

"*I'm just glad you haven't thrown her out a window or something,*" Dustin had added a little too loudly, and everyone else in the party had gone silent and looked at him. Lucas had just sighed hopelessly.

Needless to say, it was a big step to be allowed outside with her friends. Though Max was here with them again, she could avoid her much easier here than in the confines of the cabin. Already Max was keeping her distance by walking ahead with Lucas and Dustin, while Mike and Will were just picking up their bikes.

"Where are we going?" Eleven asked as they followed behind the other three.

"The Battlefield," Mike replied, trailing his bike along with him.

"Battlefield?"

"It's where we have snowball fights," Will explained.

Snow Ball. It brought back memories of butterflies in her stomach, dancing, and a kiss that had made her heart soar with an emotion she still couldn't put a name to.

But Will seemed to be using the phrase in a different context. Before she could even ask, Mike bent down and scooped up some snow in his gloved hand. He let his bike rest against his side as he straightened and used both hands to form the snow into a crude sphere.

“Snowball,” he said, showing it to her. He held the packed snow in one hand and used his other to steer his bike as they caught up with Dustin, Lucas, and Max. “And in snowball fights you do this.” He swung his arm back and threw the snowball straight ahead. It pounded right into Lucas’ back and he spun around quickly, eyes wide with indignation.

“You can’t start the fight here!”

“El didn’t know what a snowball fight was!” Mike shot back.

Lucas rolled his eyes and turned back around. “Fine. My team gets first throw.”

“What?” Mike exclaimed. “That’s not fair.”

“You threw the first snowball before the battle started. It’s completely fair.”

“Those are the rules, Mike,” Dustin agreed.

Mike sighed and let his arms fall to his sides.

“Don’t worry,” Will said, “we’ll still beat them.”

Eleven looked at the three ahead of her and then glanced over at Mike and Will. “We’re a...team?”

“Yeah,” Mike said. “Max, Lucas, and Dustin are on the other team. In a snowball fight, each team works together to get the other one out. I’ll explain it when we get there.”

Eleven felt some sort of mixture of sadness and annoyance; the composition of the teams didn’t surprise her. The addition of Max to their party had caused two groups to form, and the line between them was becoming more and more tangible every day they spent

time together. No one had ever addressed it, but Eleven could see it in the way Mike looked at Dustin and Lucas now, frowning with a look of dejection in his eyes.

It was easy to pin all the blame on Max; it was what she had been doing all along, anyway. But talking with Nancy last night had caused her to consider if this was her own fault. And though she still hadn't quite admitted it to herself, she knew deep down, somewhere, that it was.

Yet, the confusing tangle of emotions inside of her seemed impossible to sort through. Yes she had said she would give Max a chance, but how could she when she still saw her as someone who didn't belong?

Eleven decided that she would talk to Mike about it later. He had told her that he hadn't liked Max at first, but then she had "proved herself," whatever that meant. Maybe he could help her figure out how to fix this.

After walking through the woods for a few minutes, the party reached the road. The boys all climbed onto their bikes and Max put one foot on her skateboard.

"The Battlefield isn't much farther," Mike said as Eleven got on the back of his bike. "We'll ride down the road for a little bit and then go into the woods on the other side. Nobody ever drives down here," he added, looking at her over his shoulder. "No one will see you."

Eleven nodded and held onto Mike's waist as he turned his gaze ahead and started pedaling. Will rode alongside Mike and began talking to him about something Mr. Clarke had said in class yesterday. Dustin dropped back beside Will to join the conversation. Though Eleven had no idea what they were talking about, she enjoyed listening to their voices animatedly discuss the subject and occasionally rise in pitch as they argued. She found herself occupied with studying the surrounding woods, noting how pretty the trees looked with their fronds coated in snow. All in all, she was content, and she thought that maybe winter wasn't so bad after all.

Last year she had decided that she hated winter with its unforgiving cold, frosty snow, and short days. Some days had been so lonely, so cold, and so dark that she had wished she would have never escaped from the lab in the first place. But now, though the cold stung at her cheeks, the world was altogether warmer, and it had nothing to do with her new clothes. It was knowing that her and her friends were going to be okay. It was being safe. Being with Mike. Just the shift in mindset made her see the whole world differently.

Eleven wrapped her arms a little further around Mike's waist and rested her head on his shoulder. With the voices of her friends a constant hum in the background, the wind gently rustling the branches of the trees, the frozen terrain passing by in a blur, her arms around Mike, she thought that she could be happy right there forever.

"Are you cold?" Mike asked, his chin brushing against her hair as he turned his head.

"No." She squeezed him gently in a sort of hug. "I'm happy."

Though she couldn't see Mike's expression, she felt his hand cover hers, and she understood what he was saying: *I'm happy too.*

"Ugh." Dustin rolled his eyes. "You guys do know we're all *right here*, right?"

Eleven had yet to understand why the boys, especially Dustin, seemed to always tease her and Mike displayed any kind of affection towards each other, or why Mike always seemed irritated when it happened.

"Shut up!" Mike barked, right on cue.

It was another question on the ever-growing list of things she needed to ask Mike about.

"We're almost there," Mike added, quieter. Sure enough, a couple minutes later the party crossed the street and dismounted their bikes, or, in Max's case, her skateboard. They trekked into the woods once more, and Eleven marvelled at the way the snow and ice

glistened in the sunlight. Clear, cone-shaped ice chunks hung from the branches of some trees, and she remembered a year ago she had thought they looked like jagged teeth, ready to devour her.

“Mike,” she asked quietly, “what are those?” She pointed to one of the tooth-like formations close by. Despite her hushed tone, the other four turned at the sound of her question and looked where she was pointing.

“Icicles,” he told her, giving her a reassuring smile.

“Icicles,” she repeated. “They’re made of ice?” she guessed.

“Yep!” Dustin responded, looking back at her over his shoulder. “The tree gets frozen overnight, but in the daylight the ice starts melting off the branches and freezes before it can fall to the ground.”

Eleven stared at a group of icicles as they passed underneath a long tree branch. They didn’t look like teeth anymore; rather, a decoration, like the forest was preparing itself for Christmas.

“They’re pretty.”

“Yeah,” agreed Will with a smile, “they’re cool. Sometimes a bunch of icicles hang off the roof of my house in the winter. Jonathan and I used to jump on the front porch to try to make the house shake enough for them to fall. Now I just like to draw them.”

Eleven smiled back at Will. He had taken an extra effort to be kind to her ever since they had properly met. He had extensively thanked her for everything she had done, and the first time he had come over to the cabin with the boys he had given her a drawing he had created from his imagination of her closing the gate. When she had asked Mike why Will was being so nice to her, he had told her that it was just how Will was.

“We’re here,” Lucas announced, shaking Eleven from her thoughts. They had stopped on a hill that made it easy to survey the clearing below. A series of smaller hills dotted the area, and a sparse cluster of trees stood at the far end, leading back into the more

densely packed forest. The ground was coated in snow, though green leaves and patches of brown dirt occasionally broke up the smooth blanket of white.

Lucas laid his bike on its side and crossed his arms over his chest. "We're taking this side."

Mike threw his bike on the ground with more force. "You can't get first pick *and* first throw!"

"You hit me before the battle started!" Lucas exclaimed, spreading his arms in a protesting gesture.

"Let it go, Mike," Will said, leaning his bike against a tree. "We'll take the other side."

Mike rolled his eyes but acquiesced, heading off towards the opposite side of the clearing. Eleven and Will followed him while Lucas, Max, and Dustin stayed behind on the hill.

Once they walked a short distance away from the other team, Mike and Will knelt on the ground and started forming snowballs. Eleven watched them make the first few and then picked up some snow so she could follow their lead.

"Okay, here's how it goes," Mike said, his eyes remaining focused on his hands as he worked rapidly. "The goal is to hit the other team with snowballs. Once you get hit, you're out of the game. That's pretty much it. Understand?" he glanced up at her for a brief moment.

Eleven nodded. The rules seemed simple enough, but she didn't see how this was going to be fun. However, she trusted Mike, so she packed the snow between her hands into a ball and held it out towards him. "Like this?"

"Yeah! Line it up here with these."

Eleven set the snowball next to the few that Will and Mike had already fashioned. They continued working as Mike related more specific battle plans to Will, something about holding their position and retreating to the trees if they had to.

“Ready?” Lucas’ voice called after a few minutes.

“Ready!” Mike responded as he stood up with one snowball in each hand. Will straightened up next to him, holding one snowball in his right hand.

Eleven jumped to her feet as three snowballs came soaring over the hill towards Mike, Will, and her. Lucas, Dustin, and Max came running at them, yelling a battle cry as they each brandished a snowball in each of their hands. Mike ran forward, dodging one of the first throws, and tried to peg Dustin. Eleven watched as Lucas raised his arm to throw a snowball at Mike out of Mike’s line of vision.

“Mike!” she yelled in warning. Before she could even really think about what she was doing, all of the thrown snowballs froze in midair.

There was complete silence. Eleven felt blood pool above her lip.

“That’s totally not fair!” Lucas exclaimed.

But the rest of the party just started laughing, even Max, who looked around with a wide grin. “Okay, that’s awesome.”

Finally Lucas gave in with a smile and shook his head. Eleven released the snowballs and they all dropped straight to the ground.

“There aren’t any rules about not using superpowers,” Mike said with a smirk. “And we both agreed on the teams.”

“Yeah okay, whatever.” Lucas shrugged, frowning, and then quick as lightning pitched a snowball into Mike’s chest. Mike staggered backwards in surprise and Lucas cheered.

“No one ever said the game stopped!”

And just like that, the battle was in full swing. Eleven watched Mike walk off to the side. Hearing a whooshing through the air, she ducked just in time to avoid a projectile from Dustin. Even though they hadn’t said she couldn’t use her powers, she figured she

would at least try not to. She fell back to pick up one of the snowballs they had made and threw it at Lucas, though it fell several feet short. Eleven frowned and picked up two more snowballs, determined to try again.

As Eleven ran forward to rejoin the battle, the members of the other team coordinated to throw their snowballs at Will all at once. Max and Dustin's snowballs hit home, while Lucas' went wide. Will walked off to join Mike.

And suddenly, Eleven realised that she was the last one left.

She yelped in surprise as Max through a snowball that flew past her head. Her heart pounded in her ears as she dodged their throws, retreating further and further back. She threw both of her snowballs but they widely missed the mark, and she found herself backed up all the way to the cluster of trees behind where her team had made camp earlier.

Eleven knew now that she was no good at physically throwing snowballs. That meant there was only one way to make it fair.

The collection of snowballs her team had made rose into the air, making Max, Lucas, and Dustin pause. Eleven forced the snowballs at them, and all three team members were pelted with snow. Dustin even fell over backwards, his hat flying off his head as the peals of his laughter echoed around the clearing.

Mike and Will came running towards Eleven with wild cheers and hugged her as she laughed breathlessly.

"As cool as that was," Lucas said as he brushed the snow off his jacket, "I still don't think she should be allowed to use her powers."

Eleven expected Mike to come to her defense, but she was surprised when Max spoke up first, shaking the last of the snow from her hair. "Just because you throw like a little girl, it doesn't mean you have to take it out on El."

Dustin sat up, exchanging a grin and a look of surprise with Mike and Will. Eleven couldn't help but smile.

Lucas' eyes narrowed as he looked at Max. "I don't throw like a little girl!"

"Prove it." Max walked over to where Mike, Will, and Eleven were standing. "If you think it's so unfair, we'll make it even. Girls against boys."

"But there are only two of you," Dustin protested as he grabbed his hat and stood to his feet.

"Uh, yeah, I can count, thanks. That's the point."

Eleven met Mike's eyes. He frowned at her, eyebrows furrowed together in worry. "That's not a good idea."

"Why not?" Max asked. "We can take you. Right, El?"

Every eye rested on her and it seemed like the world was holding its breath. Eleven wasn't thrilled about the idea of her and Max being on the same team, but adrenaline was still pumping through her veins and she felt something new, a sort of rush that made her want to agree.

She smiled a little and nodded once. "Yes."

The boys continued to stare at her for a moment, aghast.

"A-Are you sure?" Mike stuttered, concern still clear on his face.

Eleven reached out and squeezed his hand, looking him right in the eye. "I'm sure."

"Okay." He let go of her hand. "You can have first throw. Do you want to stay here or take the hill?"

Eleven looked around her. The choice seemed obvious, as she was already familiar with the trees and the smaller slopes that surrounded them.

“We’ll stay here.”

Mike nodded and took one more look between Max and Eleven before walking away with the other three boys. They immediately started whispering excitedly, and Dustin cast a quick glance back at Eleven and Max before huddling with the other boys and joining the conversation.

“So,” Max said when the boys were far enough away, “do you have a plan?”

Eleven looked at where she had thrown the snowballs at the other team. Remembering that the trees were at her back, she turned around and looked up, noting that some of the thicker branches were covered with a thick coat of snow. She closed her eyes and concentrated on a pile of snow resting on one branch, testing its weight and how much force it would take to move it. She lifted the snow experimentally, just an inch, and then set it back down. Some excess snowflakes shook off from the mound and floated down to the ground.

Max laughed in disbelief and Eleven looked over to see that she was staring at the quivering branch. “Seriously?”

For the first time, when Eleven looked at her, she didn’t immediately think of her and Mike in the gym. Instead, Eleven smiled.

“We need to get them over here. In the trees.”

Max shrugged. “Shouldn’t be hard.”

“Are you guys ready?” Dustin shouted.

Max leaned over and scooped up some snow in her hand. “We’re ready!”

Eleven grabbed two fistfuls of snow and made them levitate along with Max’s snowball. She threw them right at the top of the hill just as Dustin’s head poked out from behind the rise. He swore and then ducked, but not before one of the snowballs swept the hat off of his head.

“That doesn’t count!” his voice called, though he was hidden now.

Max picked up two more mounds of snow. “Are you guys going to actually fire anything back or do El and I win by default?”

Mike appeared above the hill for a moment to throw a snowball at Max, but she easily dodged it. “Oooh, I’m so scared.”

Eleven and Max waited. Some more snowballs came over the hill, but the boys stayed put. Eleven threw another four snowballs over the hill but heard nothing as a result.

“What are you wimps doing?” Max asked, sending another snowball soaring.

“Staying safe!” Will called back.

“What *losers!* I mean, come on, you’re scared of two girls? Your team is double our size.”

“None of us have superpowers!” Dustin argued.

Eleven bent down to get some more snow, but as she did, Max’s voice urgently called out, “El, watch out!”

She didn’t even know where the snowball was coming from, but Eleven instinctively flattened herself on the ground and watched a snowball soar over her head. She turned towards the source and saw Lucas, his head above a small rise to her left. He must have snuck around while Max had been taunting the boys.

Max threw a snowball at him but missed. Lucas ran forward with a yell and Eleven heard the other boys echo the cry and saw them running down the hill in her peripheral vision. Lucas hurled another snowball at Eleven, but she stopped it in midair and sent it zooming straight back into his arm.

The other three boys continued racing towards them as Lucas threw his hands up in surrender and sat down.

“Keep them busy,” Eleven muttered to Max.

She nodded and started rapidly throwing snow at them, not even bothering to form it into balls anymore. Eleven took a deep breath, stretched out her hands, and lifted several square yards of snow straight up from the ground.

Dustin started yelling a string of curses as all three of the boys retreated in the opposite direction. Eleven heard Max's laughter beside her and Lucas' exclamation of "*What?*" from slightly further away as she tossed the snow right on top of Mike, Dustin, and Will, burying them entirely.

Eleven staggered on her feet as a wave of dizziness came over her. It had been stupid to use that much energy at once on a game; even after all this time, she was still healing from closing the gate. She fell straight onto her back and the world swam in front of her. Her ears started ringing as she closed her eyes.

"El. *El.*" *Lucas.* His hand gripped her shoulder and shook gently. "Are you okay?"

"El!" Mike's voice called in the distance, but she couldn't make her body respond. She felt the vibrations of footsteps as the party gathered around her.

"Not good," Dustin said.

"Is she going to be okay?" Will asked, concern clear in his voice.

"We should've never played this stupid game. We never should've even taken her away from the cabin!" Mike's frustration was evident in his tone. A moment later his hand grasped hers and his voice softened. "El?"

She was finally able to compress his hand and let out a groan. She blinked open her eyes and saw five concerned faces all staring at her.

She smiled a little as she sat up. "We win."

Dustin cracked a smile first, then Max, and then the rest of the boys, until the whole party was sitting in the snow, laughing in

relief. Mike settled next to Eleven and held onto her hand. She smiled over at him and noticed that snow still clung to every part of him, especially his dark hair. Shifting to sit on her knees, she reached out with her free hand to brush the snow from his hair. Mike chuckled and looked down at himself, clearing the snow from his jacket.

“You’re really good at snowball fights,” he said as Eleven cleared the last of the snow from his head.

“Too good,” Dustin added, shaking his head violently and making snow fling off of his curls and onto the rest of the party.

Lucas cringed and held up his hands in front of his face in defense. “Dude.”

“What?” Dustin asked innocently as he set his hat back on his head.

Eleven felt cold wetness seeping into her hair on the back of her head from where she had fallen in the snow and copied Dustin’s movements, shaking her head quickly to get the snow out of her hair.

“See?” Dustin exclaimed. “It’s effective!”

Mike grinned at Eleven and stretched out a hand towards her. “Hang on, there’s still some left.” He scooted forward and gently swept his fingers over her curls. “I really like it, you know. Your hair.” He let his hand fall to his side as he finished wiping the snow away.

“Pretty?”

His smile grew wider. “Yeah. Really pretty.”

“Hey Mike,” Dustin said, “I think I saw some mistletoe back there!”

Mike’s smile dissolved instantly into a frown and he threw a handful of snow at Dustin’s face.

“Mistletoe?” Eleven asked. The word was totally unfamiliar.

"I'll explain later," Mike said with a sigh, glaring at Dustin.

That was the end of the snowball fights in the Battlefield for the day. Not wanting to even cut it anywhere close to four o' clock and worried about Eleven's health, Mike insisted that they get going as soon as Eleven was strong enough to walk. They began their trek back to the cabin and Mike refused to let go of Eleven's hand, "Just in case she falls," he explained to the others. Eleven was glad of the excuse to be close to him. Between hanging out with the party and being trapped in the cabin with Hopper, time with Mike amounted to quick hugs goodbye and the occasional holding of hands. More and more lately she had caught herself daydreaming about being alone with Mike, a time where she could curl up next to him and they could just talk and be together without any rush or hindrance.

Max remained on Eleven's other side as they walked, though it didn't bother her as much as she thought it should. As they got closer to the cabin and Eleven had to push herself to keep going, Max looked over at her and asked, "How are you feeling?"

Eleven considered her question for a moment and then looked over her friends as they walked together. The distinct lines from earlier had congealed into a single form, and they traveled now as one party rather than two teams. Eleven mustered a small smile. "I'll be okay." If the snowball fight that had made her weak had also brought the party back together, then it was worth it.

"We make a good team," Max said.

Mike's fingers stiffened around Eleven's, but she just nodded at Max. "Yes. We do." She looked over at Mike, wondering if she had done the right thing. His smile said it all.

The rest of the way back was lighthearted and uneventful. The party made it to the cabin around half past three, and even that made Mike a little nervous, especially when he saw that Hopper was already waiting outside. Mike and Eleven walked up onto the front porch while the other four waited at the bottom of the steps.

"How'd it go?" Hopper asked.

“Fine,” Mike said, slipping his hand out of Eleven’s grasp. “No one saw her, we just stayed in the woods.” After Eleven had wiped her nose free of blood, they had all agreed to keep out the part where Eleven had exhausted herself. Hopper already worried about her wellbeing when she closed doors or moved small objects with her mind.

“Thanks, kid.” Hopper nodded at the group. “See you next weekend.”

Eleven kept her eyes on Mike. After the day she had had, and after everything she had thought through, she knew one thing: she didn’t want Mike to go. But she needed a good excuse for him to stay, and the first thing that came into her head was a question that had never been answered.

“What about mistletoe?” she asked.

Lucas and Dustin started laughing and Mike instantly turned as red as a cherry. Hopper’s eyebrows shot up to his hairline and his eyes glared daggers at Mike.

“She-she didn’t know what mistletoe was,” Mike tried to explain, but his face only turned a darker shade of red.

“It was my fault,” Dustin offered, recovering from his laughter. “I was teasing Mike about it and Eleven didn’t know what it meant so...”

“I’ll see you boys next weekend,” Hopper reiterated again, scowling at Mike this time. Mike’s eyes were wide and helpless as he looked over at Eleven.

Eleven normally didn’t argue with Hopper, but right now she needed Mike. “I want Mike to stay.”

Now it was Mike’s turn for his eyebrows to rise so high on his forehead that his hair almost covered them. Hopper’s gaze rested on Eleven.

“It’s getting dark soon and I don’t want him riding back alone at night. Neither do you.”

“But—”

“You know the new rule.”

No boys spending the night. “I know, but...I need to talk to him. Not about mistletoe,” she clarified, since that had obviously made him upset.

Hopper frowned and ran a hand through his hair as he watched Eleven. She stared back at him unwaveringly, willing him to understand. Finally, Hopper let out a long sigh.

“You’re calling your mom and asking if it’s okay, Wheeler. Just this once.”

Eleven met Mike’s eyes and grinned.

Notes for the Chapter:

Don't worry, the Eleven becomes friends with Max
saga is far from over!

Next chapter: Mike and Eleven talk and cuddle and
be adorable. Much more chill after this dense
chapter. :) (Hopefully.)

4. Peace

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry again for the long delay! Dead week and finals sort of kicked my butt.

Anyway, hope you enjoy this chapter! It felt really good to finally have Eleven get all of these feelings out. Stay tuned for the next chapter that will hopefully be up before Christmas; it's the chapter I've basically been working toward this whole time! (Not to say that the fic will be over after the next chapter, because I still have plenty more ideas!)

P.S. Thank you so much for the amazing response to this fic! You have no idea how great it makes me feel to see the comments and kudos. :)

“I’m staying.”

When Mike announced it to the rest of the party, he didn’t sound half as enthusiastic as he had when he had hung up the phone and told Eleven that his mom was letting him stay. Now he said the words quickly and with force, almost as if they were a challenge.

“What about tomorrow?” Will asked.

Mike hurried down the porch steps to grab his bike and lifted it in his arms as he clambered back up the stairs. Eleven almost offered to help him, as the bike seemed to be awkward to carry, but Mike responded to Will before she could ask.

“I’ll still meet you guys to do homework.” Mike huffed as he set the bike down on the porch and leaned it against the railing. Eleven watched him with concern not just because he had carried the bike, but because of the way he seemed to be defending his choice to stay with her.

Dustin turned and started to walk away with his bike at his

side. "Two o' clock at Will's," he called over his shoulder.

"Yeah, I know!"

Lucas wagged his eyebrows at Mike. "Have fun," he said before he followed Dustin.

"See ya," Max said with a half-smile. She met Mike's eyes first, then Eleven's briefly before she trailed after Lucas.

Finally Will waved at them both. "Don't forget about tomorrow," he told Mike.

"I won't!" Mike insisted, obviously irritated. Before the other boys and Max even reached the cabin's perimeter Mike turned around, his face set in a hard mask.

"Mike?" Eleven asked.

He met her eyes and his expression relaxed a little. "It's nothing." He tried to walk past her but she trained her gaze on him and he stopped by her side, his eyes focused on the ground.

"Mike." She knew that he would understand what she was saying with her tone of voice. *Friends don't lie.*

He scuffed his shoe on the wooden floor. "It's just...Dustin and Lucas, they don't..."

But before he could get any further Hopper opened the cabin door, making Mike's head immediately snap up.

"All right, come on," he said, waving them inside. "Before you freeze out here."

Mike followed his order without a moment's hesitation and stopped just inside the door to shed his outer coat and gloves. Eleven copied his movements and hung her jacket and gloves on the coat rack. As they both bent down to unlace their boots, Hopper shut the door behind them.

"So."

Eleven paused and glanced up at Hopper to see that his arms were crossed over his chest. Never a good sign.

“Are you going to tell me what really happened out there?”

Mike froze for a moment and then straightened up with only one boot removed. “W-What do you mean?”

“I’m not blind, kid.” Though Eleven was busy pulling her last boot off, she could feel Hopper’s gaze rest on her. “Did you use your powers?”

Exhaustion had faded away for a few minutes in the midst of excitement, but now that the feeling was fading, Eleven’s head started throbbing and her body’s achiness became more noticeable. All of a sudden, all she wanted to do was lie down.

Eleven placed her boots underneath the coat rack and then turned to face Hopper. “Yes.”

His eyes were hard and piercing. “Did something happen?”

“We were having a snowball fight,” Mike put in as he took off his second boot and came to stand next to Eleven. “It was my fault.”

Hopper kept his gaze trained on Eleven.

“I got carried away,” she admitted.

Finally he looked at Mike, a hard frown still on his face. “Is that all?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“I promise,” Eleven said.

Hopper sighed, his arms falling by his sides. “You have to be more careful. You’re still recovering.”

Eleven looked down at the ground. This wasn’t the first, second, or even tenth time he had said those exact words. “I know.”

"I know it's hard for you, kid, but look at me." Eleven obeyed and met his stern gaze. "No more using your powers, okay? I want you to promise me."

Eleven pressed her lips together. He knew that she wouldn't break a promise. But was what he was asking her to do even possible? Her gifts were a part of her, and she had grown up practicing and honing them. Was she even capable of stopping herself from using them altogether?

"I'll try. I promise."

Hopper stared at her for another moment and then nodded. "Okay. That's fair."

After a brief second of silence, Mike spoke up in a small voice. "Thanks for letting me stay."

"You're welcome, kid. I figure I owe you at least this much. But there are some rules, okay? No going outside, no—"

A shrill ring interrupted Hopper. His eyebrows furrowed together as his eyes darted over to the telephone sitting on a coffee table in the living room. He stood still at first, but as the phone rang again he strode over to the table and picked up the phone. Eleven turned to watch him and Mike did the same.

"Chief Hopper," he said.

His eyebrows rose in recognition and surprise. "Was that today?" He glanced down at his watch and muttered something unintelligible. He looked over at Mike and Eleven, sighed with resignation, and then spoke again. "Hold on, I'll be there... Yes, I'm on my way now... Twenty minutes, tops." He put the phone back down in a hurry and grabbed his gun and his keys from the kitchen counter.

"I thought you weren't working today," Eleven said he walked over to the door and grabbed his coat from the rack. He brought his gun with him everywhere he went, but she couldn't think of anything but an urgent call from the police station that would

make him leave her and Mike here on their own.

"I'm not. I have to go help Joyce out with something, okay?" He gave Mike a pointed look, like he was supposed to know what that meant. Eleven quickly looked at Mike, but his expression remained impassive and slightly confused as he watched Hopper.

With his hand on the doorknob, Hopper looked between them. "Stay inside. There's stuff for dinner when you get hungry." He focused on Eleven. "Eat the peas, and you can have *one* Eggo after dinner."

Eleven nodded mutely, hardly believing this. Was he really going to leave her alone with Mike?

Hopper opened the door. "I'll be back in about two hours. Don't be stupid." He walked outside and shut the door behind him. "Lock the door!" his muffled voice called from outside.

Eleven almost locked the locks with her mind, but she remembered her promise to Hopper and her headache started to pound at full force so she stepped forward to do it manually instead. However, Mike beat her to it and fastened all of the locks on the door. He turned around and smiled at her, though it faded into a frown and his eyebrows furrowed in concern.

"You look really tired. Do you want to sit down?"

Eleven nodded and Mike took her hand in his as he led her to the couch in the living room. She plopped down with a sigh, leaning her head back against the cushion and closing her eyes. It wasn't even dark outside yet, but already she felt like she could fall asleep.

"I can let you rest, if you want."

Eleven shook her head and sat up, blinking her eyes open. They had things to talk about, not the least of which was what Mike had started saying before Hopper had ushered them inside earlier. Rest could wait; she had waited for this for a whole year and then some.

"You were going to say something about Dustin and Lucas."

"Yeah." Mike frowned pensively and a few beats of silence passed. "They just don't get it."

"Get...what?"

His eyebrows settled low on his forehead as he thought. "They act like you're some stupid crush or something. But you're not."

Eleven frowned as she tried to understand. "Crush?"

His expression lightened as he explained. "Yeah, it's when you...like somebody. I mean, *like* like them, like you want to be around them all the time and hold hands and that kind of stuff."

Eleven looked down at their joined hands.

"That's not bad," Mike said quickly, squeezing her hand, "but crushes don't really last; you get over them. That's why you're more than that. And I guess it just makes me mad because..." He sighed and gazed down at his lap. "When you were gone, I wasn't really the same person."

Eleven thought of how she had yelled at Hopper because she had wanted to see Mike so badly.

"I was just so...angry all the time. I wanted you back. It wasn't fair that the demogorgon took you away right when everything was supposed to turn out okay."

Eleven remembered throwing the book at Hopper, trying to hurt him. She had yelled, screamed, and cried. *I hate you*. She almost cringed as she thought of the words coming out of her mouth, spiced with more anger than she had ever felt in her life.

"I needed you, and I missed you so much, but there was no one who really understood."

Eleven squeezed his hand harder and looked over at him. "Me too."

His eyes widened with astonishment. "Really?"

Eleven nodded slowly, not proud of all she had done. She felt like she had matured years over the past few weeks, though she thought that most of it was due to her realisation of all her mistakes. She finally understood that Hopper had been trying so hard to protect her and had wanted nothing but her safety. She regretted leaving and completely disregarding everything that Hopper had already done for her. She was resolved to be a better listener and to try and control her temper, to try to understand the root of an argument instead of just immediately getting upset.

“I fought with Hopper because I wanted to see you.”

I need to see him.

“I was so tired of doing the same thing every day. I was trapped and I had to live here for whole year knowing that you were so close.”

Nothing ever happens here!

She paused and shifted her gaze so she didn't meet his eyes. “One day while Hopper was at work, I found a file he had kept on my mama. So I left.”

“You found your mom?” Mike asked, his voice filled with incredulity.

Eleven kept her eyes downcast. She wished it were as simple as that. “I found her and she showed me her memories. But I couldn't really talk to her; not like we're talking right now. She's...” She stared at their joint hands and tried to think of the right word. Not ‘gone,’ but, “...lost.”

Mike's voice softened. “What happened to her?”

“Papa took me from her.” Mike's hand stiffened in hers. “And then he hurt her.” A lump lodged itself in her throat but she continued to squeeze the words out. “He hurt her so much that she can't even talk.” She gripped his hand hard as tears blurred her vision. “Mike,” she squeaked. He turned to face her as best as he could on the couch, his expression creased in worry. “She's lost

forever,” Eleven sobbed, unable to control the tears now. The sadness, the longing, the past and future that never were and never could be had all been bottled up inside of her for so long that now it came gushing out in her tears as she turned into Mike and wrapped her arms around him. He returned the embrace and held her tightly.

“I’m so sorry, El.” The way he said her name made it sound like he was on the verge of tears too. “I’m so sorry.”

Eleven cried for a long time, and not just for Mama, but for everything. Yet this time, as opposed to all the other times she had wept before, every tear made her feel lighter. This time she had someone to share in the sorrow with her, someone to hold her and ground her to reality, reminding her that everything was going to be all right because they were together.

Finally she breathed a long sigh, and the sobs faded away. Still shaking a little, she held onto Mike as she wiped away the last of her tears.

“Thank you,” she breathed, her voice unsteady.

“For what?”

Eleven pulled away from Mike and sniffed, trying to smile. “I’ve always been alone when I’ve cried.”

His smile grew and he found her hand again. “You don’t have to be alone ever again, El.”

She tried to smile back, but her conscience reminded her that she wasn’t in the clear yet. In a way, the worst was still to come. Though telling Mike about Mama was no doubt a large part of the weight she had been carrying, a gnawing feeling in her stomach reminded her that she had been harboring an even more intense guilt than the kind she felt for disobeying Hopper.

This was a story she hadn’t told anyone yet, not even Hopper.

“There’s more.” She found only encouragement and attentiveness in Mike’s eyes, and somehow that made it worse.

“Okay.”

Eleven spoke slowly and kept her eyes focused downward, still not entirely committed to telling this story. “I didn’t just go to Mama’s. In her memories, she kept showing me this girl who was with me in the lab. I thought Mama wanted me to find her.”

“So you found this girl too?”

Eleven nodded. “My sister.” She absentmindedly rubbed her thumb over her tattoo. Mike’s eyes followed her movements.

“If you’re eleven...” he mused, meeting her eyes for a brief moment, “that means there must have been more before you.”

“Yes. She’s eight.”

“Where did you find her?”

Eleven hesitated, sensing that Mike was going to react strongly. “Chicago.”

“Chicago?” Mike blurted out, halfway jumping off the couch. “You went to Chicago by yourself?”

Eleven didn’t meet his eyes. “Yes. I took the bus.”

Mike said nothing, and Eleven chanced a look at his face to see that he was staring at her, mouth open, disbelieving.

“Don’t tell Hopper,” she remembered to say quickly. “He doesn’t know.”

Mike nodded, finally closed his mouth, then said softly, “Promise.” He settled back onto the couch, though his wide eyes betrayed that he was still trying to process what she had told him. “So...what did you do with your sister when you found her?”

Fear instantly clenched Eleven’s gut like some ruthless monster. But it was a kind of fear she still wasn’t familiar with, a kind she had been battling for a month now. Fear of herself. Fear of what she could do, of what she could become, of what she *would have*

become if she hadn't run away from the lab and found Mike and the others.

"El?" Mike prompted, pressing her hand.

Eleven shook her head and eased her hand from Mike's grasp. She crossed her arms over her chest, as if it could ward off the terrible feeling inside of her. "I shouldn't have stayed there."

"What happened?" he asked a little more insistently.

Eleven balled her hands into fists, dreading what she knew she had to confess, the thing that had been eating her alive. "A long time ago, you told me I wasn't a monster. But after what I did, I..." She trailed off, not knowing how to finish. She had often wondered what the look on her face had been like when she had almost murdered that man. She had wondered so many times if she had looked like Papa.

She had come to the conclusion almost immediately afterwards that to that man, she must have looked like a monster.

"I almost killed him." After so long she had expected to blurt it out, but now she could barely manage a whisper. Though her eyes were dry, the weight of her shame still had an effect like tears, constricting her throat and making her tremble.

Mike reached out for her, but she barely even registered his touch as his hand rested on her arm. "Who?" he asked gently, no judgment or condemnation visible anywhere in his expression.

"The man who hurt Mama." She swallowed hard before she continued. "I saw him in Mama's memories and I found him. He used to be one of the bad men, but he wasn't trying to hurt us. My sister just wanted to kill him; she wanted *me* to kill him, and I almost did." She remembered the raw power she had felt, the feeling that for once in her life *she* was in control and no one else.

The thing that scared her the most was that it had felt *good*.

Mike said nothing, but his eyes widened.

"I saw a picture of his daughters, and I stopped." She sighed long and hard, trying to put into words what she had only thought before. "I thought...he took my Mama away from me, and I'll never get her back. But if I kill him, I'll take him away from his daughters and they'll never get him back. I'll be the same as him. The same as Papa."

Mike's fingers compressed her arm. "You're better than them."

"But I almost wasn't." She still couldn't directly look at him. "I was just so *angry* about Mama."

"You should've been. It's not fair."

"But I get angry a lot. And when I'm mad, everything goes out of control." She paused again, different memories pouring in. "When I fought with Hopper, I threw things at him and I said I hated him. The cabin was a mess." She sighed as she let out the question that had been plaguing her mind for so long. "What if I hurt him? Or you? Or anyone else in the party?"

Mike was quiet for a minute and Eleven just stared at her lap. She wondered if he had ever seriously considered it. She wondered if this would change everything.

But finally Mike ducked to meet her eyes and spoke firmly. "You're not going to hurt us, El. You've saved all of us *more* than once. And you do have control over what you do. You closed the gate, remember? And you didn't kill that man."

It wasn't a good enough answer. Eleven shook her head and avoided his eyes.

"El." Mike shook her arm gently and she finally looked up at him. "I'm not afraid of you. Neither is Hopper, and neither are Dustin, Will, Lucas, or Max. You're our mage. You protect us from the bad guys; you're not one of them."

I can save them.

The sincerity in his eyes made it impossible to doubt that he

truly meant everything he said; and though all of the doubts in Eleven's mind weren't instantly quelled, Mike's faith in her calmed the storm that had been raging inside of her. She threw her arms around him again, feeling lighter than she ever had.

For some reason her mind turned to a song she had heard recently. She couldn't remember all of the words, but she remembered that one line had said *'peace on Earth'* because she had asked Hopper what 'peace' meant.

He had frowned and sighed, his eyes rolling upward as he thought. *"It's like being content, but you don't have to be happy to feel peace. It's sort of like the feeling when everything is finally okay."*

Eleven smiled. For the first time that she could remember, she felt peace.

Notes for the Chapter:

Next chapter: Eleven's been told that Christmas is one of the most important days of the year, so she's bummed when she can't spend it with her friends. However, Hopper has a trick up his sleeve that just might save Christmas...

5. Christmas

Notes for the Chapter:

MERRY CHRISTMAS!!!

I hope you enjoy this chapter, and I hope every single one of you has a wonderful holiday season. :)

When Eleven woke up, she immediately knew what day it was: Christmas.

Last year when she had been wandering around in the snowy woods, she hadn't even known that Christmas existed. A little later, after Hopper had found her and they had cleaned up the cabin, he had started reading to her before she went to bed. She had learned most of her new vocabulary just from that hour or so every night, and one of the new things she had learned about from a book was Christmas.

She still didn't really get the whole reason behind the holiday—it had something to do with religion and someone called Jesus—but Hopper had emphasised that it was a time when people exchanged presents, ate a lot of cookies, and put up pretty decorations.

“Do people celebrate it everywhere?” she had asked him, trying to understand.

“Just about.”

She had thought about the mundane day to day life she had lived for so long in Hawkins Lab. *“Why weren't there pretty lights in the lab?”*

Hopper had sighed, running a hand through his hair. *“I don't think your Papa was too big on holidays. He didn't strike me as someone full of Christmas cheer.”*

“Will we celebrate it here?”

His expression had lightened then and he had smiled. *“Yeah. Yeah, we*

will.”

True to his word, Hopper had adorned the cabin with colourful Christmas lights and put up a Christmas tree in one corner of the living room. And though the boys had boasted amongst each other about how many presents were under their trees each year, in the cabin there were only two gifts to be seen: one for Eleven, and one for Hopper. Yet, Eleven was far from disappointed. She had never received any wrapped gifts before, and even just getting one thing was enough to make it special. The excitement was doubled with the fact that she had gotten a present for Hopper, willingly paid for by Mike and wrapped by Mrs. Byers. This would be her first time giving someone a gift, and for the past few days she had been so excited about it that she had almost just told Hopper what it was.

With all the joy of expectation, there was only one thing about Christmas that Eleven knew she would miss: her friends. Hopper had told her that Christmas was a time when people got together with their families, but when she had asked if her friends would come to the cabin on Christmas, he had told her that they had to be with their families. This had lowered her spirits, but she knew that Hopper was trying to make up for it by having all the other aspects of Christmas in the house. He had promised her lots of food, cookies, and Christmas movies.

This year, at least, that would have to be enough. And with the way the day started out, Eleven thought that it might be.

When she finally got out of bed and left her room, Hopper greeted her from the kitchen with a smile and said, “Merry Christmas, kid!”

Eleven recognised the familiar scent of toasted Eggo’s and her mouth watered. She watched as Hopper put two plates side by side on the kitchen counter, both heaped with Eggo’s, whipped cream, chocolate syrup, and sprinkles.

It was probably the best breakfast she had ever had.

Next Eleven dressed warmly, under Hopper’s orders, and went outside on the front porch with him to watch the snow fall. He

brought out hot chocolate for both of them, and Eleven noticed that he had piled a mountain of mini marshmallows on hers.

“Why does snow fall instead of rain when it’s cold?” Eleven asked, holding out her hand to catch a snowflake in her palm. The snow melted immediately on contact with her skin, but a bit of chilly wetness remained.

“Snow is just frozen rain.” Hopper took a sip of his hot chocolate and stared out into the woods. “Once it gets below a certain temperature, the rain turns into snow.”

“What temperature?”

Hopper looked over at her with a puzzled frown. “Thirty-two degrees Fahrenheit is the freezing point.”

“Thirty-two degrees,” she repeated softly to herself. It wasn’t much, but one day she hoped that she could keep up with all of the party’s scientific discussions.

Once the hot chocolate was all gone they went back inside. Eleven’s eyes were immediately drawn to the Christmas tree.

“Can we open the presents yet?”

Hopper seemed to think about it, but then he shook his head. “Let’s wait just a little longer. Trust me.”

She did trust him, and anyway, he knew much more about Christmas than she did, so she let the subject drop.

That was when Eleven’s excitement diminished and the day started feeling like just another day stuck in the cabin.

They sat on the couch, bundled up in blankets, and watched a movie playing on the TV called *It’s a Wonderful Life*. Eleven was interested at parts, but while Hopper tried to explain what was going on in the movie, she still didn’t quite get it and she thought it went on for far too long.

“You’ll appreciate it more when you’re older,” Hopper said

when it was over.

Then they started putting together a puzzle that depicted a winter scene. Hopper put on a Christmas record he had already played several times throughout the month and sang along at some parts. And while Eleven always found it amusing to watch him sing or dance, she couldn't shake the feeling that Christmas wasn't turning out to be as great as she had hoped.

That was when the secret knock sounded at the door.

Eleven froze and stared at the door. Very few people knew that knock. She knew what Hopper had said about her friends not being able to come over, but she hoped more than anything that Mike was on the other side of that door.

Hopper looked down at his watch as he stood up. "Right on time," he muttered.

Eleven jumped to her feet and followed him as he ambled toward the door. "Who is it?"

He started undoing the locks on the door and didn't answer until the last one was unlocked. He looked down at her and his lips stretched into a wide smile. "Family."

Hopper opened the door to reveal several familiar faces crowded together on the porch amidst a backdrop of heavily falling snow. "Merry Christmas!" they all shouted, and Hopper joined in too.

Eleven just gawked at them for a moment, wondering if this was real. Not only was the entire party present, including Max, but Nancy, Jonathan, Steve, and Mrs. Byers stood behind them, laden with large containers.

"Come on in," Hopper said, and automatically Eleven stepped aside to allow them to enter. She still couldn't quite believe her eyes as she watched everyone file in and say hello to her. Mike grabbed her hand for just a moment and smiled at her, and suddenly she realised that they were really here to see her on Christmas.

"Hey," Steve called, still on the porch, "what should I do with

the b—”

Everyone else turned to shush him loudly, while Dustin exclaimed, “Dude!”

“Okay, geez, *present*,” Steve amended.

“Leave it on the porch for now,” Hopper said with a quick glance in Eleven’s direction. But as Eleven met Hopper’s gaze, she realised that he must have planned for this to happen. That time he had talked with Jonathan...the way he had left so quickly when Mike had been here...she knew that it had all been about this.

Light chatter sprung up between the guests, debates about where to put all the containers of food and contemplation on where to hang their jackets since the coat rack was full. In the midst of it, Eleven was able to walk up to Hopper undisturbed as he fastened the locks on the door back in place.

“You did this for me?” she asked.

Hopper reached down to ruffle her hair with a smile. “I wanted you to have the best Christmas ever, kid. You deserve it. Everyone else agreed with me.”

Eleven felt her lips stretch into an overjoyed smile. No one had ever done anything like this for her before. She stepped forward and hugged Hopper, closing her eyes as she pressed her ear against his chest. “Thank you.”

His arms wrapped around her and he held her close. “You’re welcome.”

Eleven stepped away from his embrace and smiled up at him for a moment before she scanned the cabin for Mike. She spotted him in the kitchen helping Nancy unwrap the food containers. He happened to glance up as she gazed at him, and he grinned at her. Without any words spoken they started towards each other and met in an embrace.

“Merry Christmas,” he said softly in her ear.

Eleven squeezed him in a tight hug, unspeakably grateful for him and for what this day had turned out to be. She couldn't even begin to express how happy it made her that they had all come to the cabin on Christmas day, despite the difficulties they had probably experienced in leaving their families.

"I'm so glad you're here." It wasn't even close to expressing the incredible joy she felt, but it was all she knew to say.

"Yeah," Mike said as he pulled away, his gaze flicking over her shoulder for just a moment. No doubt Hopper was watching them. "Mom barely let us come," he added, looking back at her.

"You're welcome," Nancy called from the kitchen. Eleven looked past Mike to see that Nancy was smirking at them. "I'm the one who got through to Mom and Dad," she explained.

"Thank you," Eleven said, wondering if she could ever say those words enough tonight.

Nancy smiled in response and Eleven turned back to Mike as he asked, "Are you hungry?" His eyebrows rose in an innocent look he always wore when he was trying to accommodate her. "Mrs. Byers made tons of food!" He turned and walked to the kitchen counter, where the containers were all lined up. Mrs. Byers came up behind them with a stack of paper plates and placed them on the counter.

"I think I might have burned the turkey," she said with a frown as she anxiously glanced over the food.

Jonathan laughed as he appeared with a box of plastic silverware. "Mom, it all looks fine."

"Hey," Steve said, grabbing a plate, "I'm starving, so as long as it's food, it'll be great."

Once the word "food" started being tossed around, everyone gathered around the kitchen. They each served themselves, and though Steve and Dustin piled mashed potatoes and turkey on their plates, there was still somehow enough for everyone. Because the kitchen table was so small, the party migrated to the couches and let

the older kids and the adults claim the table and the extra chairs Hopper had pulled up.

“This is great, Mom!” Will said as he started eating. The rest of the party, including Eleven, echoed his praise. Everyone was silent at first as they all began eating, but soon enough the boys seemed to resume a conversation they had started earlier in the car about what they had gotten for Christmas.

“It was Lucas’ turn,” Dustin said.

Lucas shrugged. “Mostly I just got a bunch of clothes, but I also got a Han Solo action figure and a few comics.”

“I still say I got the best,” Dustin said. Max rolled her eyes.

“What did you get for Christmas, El?” Will asked.

Eleven swallowed her bite of mashed potatoes and looked over at the Christmas tree. “I don’t know yet. Hopper told me to wait to open my present.”

The party all exchanged glances with each other, and Eleven felt like she was missing something. “What?”

“Nothing,” Max said quickly, taking another bite of food. The party went silent for a minute.

It seemed like the surprises for the night weren’t over.

The boys seemed to shovel the rest of the food down their throats and then ran over to Hopper. They all started whispering excitedly to him, but when Eleven looked in question at Max, she just shrugged.

“Just wait until we’re all done,” Hopper said at a normal volume.

Eleven took the last bite of her food and walked into the kitchen to throw away her plate and silverware. “I’m done,” she stated, starting to feed off of the boys’ excitement.

“Me too,” Max said behind her.

“Just let them give it to her, Hopper,” Mrs. Byers said.

Hopper looked at the boys, then at Joyce. “All right.” He nodded at the boys. “Go ahead.”

“Yes!” they exclaimed as one. Max joined them as they massed at the door and Mike unlocked all of the bolts. When he pulled open the door, snow blew inside, bringing in a chill. Hopper cast a glance of concern outside, but his expression lightened as the party stepped out onto the porch and came back in rolling a brand new bike between them.

Once again, Eleven found that she could only stare at it. Its black surface was glossy and beautiful.

“We all chipped in,” Mike said. Hopper got up and closed the door behind them, though he then turned and watched Eleven.

“You can ride with us now!” Dustin said with a wide grin.

Eleven looked around at all the faces smiling at her and couldn’t believe that she had such amazing friends. Did everyone’s friends do things like this, or was she just extremely lucky?

“Thank you,” she breathed as she stepped forward to touch the smooth metal and grip the handles of the bike.

“We can teach you how to ride it,” Mike offered.

Suddenly, Eleven realised that this meant she wouldn’t ride on the back of Mike’s bike anymore. She had always loved the excuse to be close to him.

“Can I still ride on the back of your bike sometimes?” she asked quietly. Chuckles resounded throughout the room.

Mike’s cheeks turned slightly red. “Yeah, sure. Whenever you want.”

She smiled at him and didn’t have a word for how happy she

was. It was the best Christmas ever.

"I think it's time to open your present under the tree," Hopper said.

Mike held onto the bike as Eleven rushed over to the tree and grabbed both presents. She handed Hopper his present and cast a smile at Mike. "I already got a present. It's your turn," she said to Hopper.

He smirked and then tore at the wrapping paper around the present. In a moment his smile turned to an expression of awe.

"Wow," he said, turning the coffee thermos around in his hands. It was simple, just a white body with a black top, but Mike had told her she should get him something he would use. And Hopper drank a *lot* of coffee.

Hopper met her eyes. "Thanks, kid, that's..." He looked at the thermos again, still awed and seemingly lost for words. Eleven grinned up at him. "This is great."

"Open yours!" Dustin said excitedly to Eleven.

"It goes with the bike," Hopper said, setting the thermos down on the table.

Eleven ripped the paper and was left with a small box. She opened it up, reached inside, and pulled out a little metal bell.

"It goes right here," Lucas said, pointing to a spot on one of the bike's handlebars. "You ring it when you want people to get out of the way."

"Or if you just want to be annoying, like Dustin," Mike said.

"Hey!" Dustin said defensively.

Eleven just smiled. She kept having the feeling that this was a dream, that all of it was too good to be true.

"Do you like it?" Hopper asked, nodding to the bike.

Had he not already gotten the answer from her smile? “Yes!” She looked down at the bell and rung it a couple times to test it out. Then she looked around at all the people surrounding her, people who most would call friends, but people who she called family.

“This is the best Christmas ever,” she said, meeting everyone’s eyes. “Thank you.”

Dustin put an arm around her and hugged her from the side and Lucas hugged her from the other side. Eleven held her arms out for Mike and he wrapped his arms around her waist. Will wedged himself in between Mike and Dustin and tried to throw his arms around El, but only succeeded in hitting Dustin’s head with one arm and bumping Mike’s shoulder with the other. The four of them laughed as Max joined in, putting one arm around Lucas’ shoulders.

Eleven heard a clicking noise and the party quickly dispersed. “Really?” Will asked, raising his eyebrows at Jonathan with what would have been sarcasm if a smile hadn’t been twitching at his lips.

Jonathan lowered his camera from his face and smiled. “You guys will thank me one day.”

“Yeah, when we’re being blackmailed,” Lucas said, taking a full step away from Max.

Despite the complaints, Jonathan continued to take pictures throughout the night, and Eleven joined Dustin in purposefully making funny faces in what were supposed to be candid shots. Everyone came together talking and laughing, recounting stories, and talking of the new year. Eleven sat next to Mike on the couch and didn’t contribute much to the conversation. She was happy simply having her family here.

Eventually Mrs. Byers announced that they had to leave, as she had promised everyone’s parents that they wouldn’t get back too late. Amidst grumbles from the party everyone stood up and went to collect their coats, except for Mike, who stayed behind with Eleven.

Once everyone cleared out of the living room, Mike turned towards her. “Hey,” he said, reaching into his pocket, “I wanted to

show you this.” He pulled out a few sprigs of some sort of plant covered in green leaves and white berries.

“It’s mistletoe,” he explained, glancing up at her.

Eleven reached out and pinched the mistletoe in between her forefinger and thumb. She studied it and thought that the white berries made it really pretty.

“There’s this tradition around Christmas where you’re supposed to hang it up as decoration,” Mike continued. He averted his eyes and shrugged. “But when you’re underneath the mistletoe with someone, you’re supposed to kiss them.”

Eleven frowned at him. It seemed a little strange to kiss someone just because there was a plant above your head, but at this point she wasn’t going to question it. She lifted the mistletoe above their heads. “Like this?”

Mike grinned and leaned forward to kiss her lips for a brief moment. His hand found hers and he squeezed it. “I love you, El,” he said softly.

She stared down at their hands and then looked up into his eyes. “I love you too, Mike.” She held the mistletoe in her fist and pressed it against her chest. Mike’s smile made her think of his smile when he had seen her for the first time in a year. It was a smile that made her feel like she was home.

“You can keep it if you want,” Mike said, nodding at her hand.

She nodded. She was going to keep it forever.

Suddenly, Dustin swore loudly from the front door. Eleven shot to her feet, used to his tone of voice meaning danger, and Mike followed her a second later.

“What?” Mike asked.

Dustin shot him a look that said “Duh?” and gestured outside the open front door. Snow flurried inside the house, coating everyone at the door, and the wind shrieked loudly. Hopper quickly closed the

door and put one hand on his hip, rubbing the other hand over his forehead.

“Well,” he said with a sigh, “it looks like we’re snowed in.”

Notes for the Chapter:

Sorry for leaving you guys hanging, but I've decided to complete this series with this chapter. I don't have the same inspiration to write Stranger Things that I used to, and I don't want to post something that doesn't have my heart in it!

However, I'm sure I'll be completely emotional and obsessed once Season 3 comes out, so I'll probably write another fic then!

Thank you, and again I'm sorry!